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As I entered my room with a lighted candle in my hand there came an awful crash at the window—the glass and frame work were shattered to atoms and in the current of air that rushed through the room my light went out. Then there came a crackling sound from the branches of an old apple tree beneath the window—then my toilet table was overturned, the looking glass smashed to pieces on the floor, and I was conscious that somebody had stepped into the room.

At the same moment the door behind me was pushed open and Hagar, frightened out of her wits, peered in with a lamp in her hand.

By its light I first saw Philip Rutley. A well-built, manly, handsome young fellow, with bright eyes and close-cropped curly hair, he seemed a merry boy who had just popped over a wall in search of a cricket ball rather than an intruder who had broken into the house of two lone women in so alarming a manner.

My fear yielded to indignation when I realized that it was a strange man who had made his way into my room with so little ceremony, but his first words—or rather, the way in which he spoke them disarmed me.

I began to thank him for his pardon. Pay for all the damage. It's only my balloon!

Good gracious! ejaculated Hagar. My curiosity was aroused. I went forward to the shattered window.

Your balloon! Did you come down in a balloon? Where is it?

All safe outside, replied the aeronaut consolingly. Not a bad descent, considering this confounded—I beg pardon—this confounding fog. Thought it was half a mile up in the air. Opened the valve a little to drop through the cloud and discover my location. Ran against your house and anchored in your apple tree. Have you any men about the place to help me get the gas out?

We fetched one of our farm laborers and managed things so well, in spite of the darkness, that about midnight we had the great clumsy thing lying upon the lawn in a state of collapse. Instead of leaving it there with the car safely wedged into the apple tree until the morning light would let him work more easily, Rutley must needs finish the job right off, as he said, and the result of this was that while he was standing in the car a bough suddenly broke and he was thrown to the ground, sustaining such injuries that he found himself senseless when we ran to help him.

We carried him into the drawing room, by the window of which he had fallen, and when we got a doctor for him it was considered best that he should remain with us that night. How could we refuse him a shelter? The nearest inn was a long way off, and how could he be moved there among people who would not care for him, when the doctor said that it was probable that the poor fellow was seriously hurt internally?

We kept him with us that night; yes, and for weeks after. By Heaven's mercy he will be with me all the rest of my life.

It was this unexpected visit of Philip's and the feeling that grew between us as I nursed him well and strong again, that brought it about that I told Kenneth Moore, who had become so repugnant to me that I could not bear to see him or hear him speak, that I wanted to be released from the promise he had wrung from me that night at the garden gate.

His rage was terrible to witness. He saw at once that my heart was given to some one else, and guessed who it must be; for, of course, everybody knew about our visitor from the clouds. He refused to release me from my pledge to him, and uttered such wild threats against poor Philip, whom he had not seen, and who, indeed, had not spoken of love to me at that time, that it precipitated my union with his rival. One insult that he was base enough to level at Philip and me stung me so deeply that I went at once to Mr. Rutley and told him how it was possible for evil minds to misconstrue his continuing to reside at the farm.

When I next met Kenneth Moore I was leaving the Registrar's office upon the arm of my husband. Kenneth did not know what had happened, but when he saw us walking openly together his face assumed an expression of such intense malignity that a great fear for Philip came like a chill upon my heart, and when we were alone together under the roof that might henceforth harmlessly cover us both I had but one thought, one intense desire—to quit it for ever in secret with the man I loved and leave no footprint behind for our enemy to track us by.

It was now that Philip told me that he possessed an independent fortune, by virtue of which the world lay spread out before us for a choice of a home.

I had never mentioned to Philip the name of Kenneth Moore and so he thought it a mere playful caprice that made me say:

Let us go Philip, no one knows where—not even ourselves. Let heaven guide us in our choice of a resting place. Let us vanish from this village as if we had never lived in it. Let us go and be forgotten.

He looked at me in astonishment and replied in a joking way:

The only means I know of to carry out your wishes to the letter would be a nocturnal departure as I arrived—that is to say in my balloon.

Yes, Philip, yes! I exclaimed eagerly in your balloon tonight in your balloon.

That night in a field by the reservoir

of the gasworks of Nettle-lone, the balloon was inflated and the car loaded with stores for our journey to unknown lands. The great fabric swayed and struggled in the strong breeze that blew over the hills and it was with some difficulty that Philip and I took our seats. All was in readiness when Philip, searching the car with a lantern discovered that we had not with us the bundle of rugs and wraps which I had got ready for carrying off.

Keep her steady boys! he cried; I must run back to the house. And he leaped from the car and disappeared in the darkness.

It was weird to crouch their alone, with the great balloon swaying over my head, each plunge threatening to dislodge me from the seat to which I clung, the cords and the wicker work straining and creaking and the swish of the silk sounding like the hiss of a hundred snakes. It was alarming in no small degree to know how little prevented me from shooting up solitarily to take an indefinite place among the stars. I confess that I was nervous but I only called to the men who were holding the car to please take care and not let me go without Mr. Rutley.

The words were scarcely out of my mouth when a man, whom we all thought was he, climbed into the car and hoarsely told them to let go. The order was obeyed and the earth seemed to drop away slowly beneath us as the balloon arose and drifted away before the wind.

You haven't the rugs after all I exclaimed to my companion. He turned and flung his arms about me and the voice of Kenneth Moore it was that replied to me:

I have you; I swore I would have you and now I got you at last!

I am instant, as I perceived that I was being carried off from my husband by the very man I had been trying to escape. I seized the grapple that lay handy and flung it over the side. It was attached to a long stout cord which was fastened to the body of the car and by the violent jerks that ensued I knew that I was not too late to snatch at an anchor and the chance of a rescue. The balloon heavily ballasted, was drifting along near the ground with the grappling iron tearing through the hedges and fences and trees, right in the direction of our farm. How I prayed that it might again strike against the house, as it did with Philip, and that he might be near to succor me.

As we swept along the field the grapple taking here and there a secure hold for a moment or so, would bring the car side down to the earth, nearly jerking us out, but we both clung fast to the cordage, and then the grapple would tear its way through and the balloon would rise like a great bird into the air.

It was in the moment that one of these checks occurred, when the balloon had keeled over in the wind until it lay almost horizontally upon the surface of the ground, that I saw Philip Rutley standing in the meadow beneath me. He cried to me as the car descended to him with me clinging to the ropes and framework for my life:

Courage dearest! You're anchored. Hold on tight. You won't be hurt.

Down came the car sideways and struck the ground violently, almost crushing him. As it rebounded he clung to the edge and held it down, shouting for help. I did not dare let go my hold as the balloon was struggling furiously, but I shrieked to Philip that Kenneth Moore had tried to carry me off and implored him to save me from that man. But before I could make myself understood Kenneth who like myself had been holding on for dear life, threw himself suddenly upon Philip, who, to ward off a shower of savage blows, let go of the car. There was a heavy gust of wind a tearing sound, the car rose out of Philip's reach, and we dragged our anchor once more. The ground flew beneath us and my husband was gone.

I screamed with all my might and prepared to fling myself out when we came to the earth again, but my captor, seizing each article that lay on the floor of the car, hurled forth with the frenzy of a madman ballast, stores, water keg, cooking apparatus, everything, indiscriminately. For a moment this unburdening of the balloon did not have the effect one would suppose—that of making us shoot swiftly up into the sky—and I trusted that Philip and the men who had helped us at the gas work had got hold of the grapple line and would haul it down; but looking over the side I perceived that we were flying along unfettered and increasing each minute our distance from the earth.

We were off then, Heaven alone could tell whether. I had lost the protection of my husband and fallen utterly into the power of a lover who was terrifying and hateful to me.

Away we sped in the darkness, higher and higher, faster and faster, and I crouched, half-fainting in the bottom of the car, while Kenneth Moore, bending over me, poured his horrible love into my ear.

Minnie! My Minnie! Why did you try to play me false? Didn't you know your old playmate better than to suppose he would give you up? Thank your stars, girl, you are now quite out of that scoundrel, and that the very steps that he took to ruin you have put you in my power to save you from him and from your willful self.

I forgot that he did not know Philip and I had been married that morning, and, indignant that he should speak so of my husband, I accused him in turn of seeking to destroy me. How dare he interfere with me? How dare he speak ill of a man who was worth a thousand of

himself—who had not persecuted me all my life, who loved me honestly and truly, and who I loved with all my soul? I called Kenneth Moore a coward, a cruel, cowardly villain, and commanded him to stop the balloon, to let me go back to my home—back to Philip Rutley, who was the only man I could ever love in the whole world!

You are out of your senses, Minnie, he answered, and he clasped me tightly in his arms, while the balloon mounted higher and higher. You are angry with me now, but when you realize that you are mine forever and cannot escape, you will forgive me—yes, and love me, for I love you so well.

Never! I cried, never! You are a thief! You have stolen me, and I hate you! I shall always hate you. Either then endure you I will make the balloon fall right down and we will both be dashed to pieces.

I was so furious with him that I seized the valve line that swung near me at the moment and tugged at it with all my might. He grasped my hand but I wound the cord about my arms, held on to it with my teeth and he could not drag it from me. In the struggle we nearly overturned the car. I did not care, I would gladly have fallen out and lost my life now that I had lost Philip.

Then Kenneth took from his pocket a large knife and unclasped it. I laughed aloud for I thought he meant to frighten me into submission. But I soon saw what he meant to do. He climbed up the cordage and cut the valve line through.

Now are you conquered! he cried, and we will voyage together to the world's end.

I had risen to my feet and watched him, listened to him with a thrill of despair; but even as his triumphant words appalled me the car swayed down upon the side opposite to where I stood—the side where still hung the long line with the grapple—and I saw the hands of a man upon the ledge; the arms, the head and the shoulders of a man, who the next minute was standing in the car, I fast in his embrace; Philip Rutley, my true love my husband.

Then it seemed to me that the balloon collapsed and all things melted, and I was whirling away—down, down, down! How long I was unconscious I do not know, but it was daylight when I opened my eyes. It was piercingly cold—snow was falling; and I lay in Philip's arms, with his coat over me, while he sat in his shirt sleeves holding me. On the other side stood Kenneth Moore. He also was in his shirt sleeves. His coat he had also devoted to covering me. Both those men were freezing there for my sake, and I was ungrateful enough to shiver.

I need not tell you that I gave them no peace until they had put their coats on again. Then we all crouched together in the bottom of the car to keep each other warm. I shrank from Kenneth a little, but not much, for it was kinder of him—so kind and generous—to suffer that cold for me. What surprised me was that he made no objection to my resting in Philip's arms, and Philip did not seem to mind his drawing close to me.

But Kenneth explained: Mr. Rutley has told me you are already his wife Minnie. Is that true?

I confirmed it, and asked him to pardon my choosing where my heart inclined me. If that is so, he said, I have little to forgive and much to be forgiven. Had I known how things stood, I loved you too well to imperil your happiness and your life and the life of the man you prefer to me.

But the danger is all over now said I; let us be good friends for the future.

We may at least be friends, Kenneth replied; and I caught a glance of some mysterious import that passed between the men. The question it would have led me to ask was postponed by the account Philip gave of his presence in the balloon—how by springing into the air as the grapple swung past him, dragging clear by the rising balloon, he had caught the irons and then the ropes, climbing up foot by foot, swinging to and fro in the darkness, up, up, until the whole length of the rope was accomplished and he reached my side. Brave, strong, dear Philip!

And, now, once more he would have it that I must wear his coat.

The sun's up, Minnie, and he'll soon put warmth into our bones. I'm going to have some exercise. My coat will be best over you.

Had it not been so excruciatingly cold we might have enjoyed the grandeur of our sail through the bright, clear heavens, the big brown balloon swelling broadly above us. Philip tried to keep up our spirits by calling attention to things, but Kenneth said little or nothing and looked so despondent that, wishing to divert his thoughts from his disappointment concerning myself, which I supposed was his trouble, I heedlessly blurted out that I was starving and asked him to give me some breakfast.

Then it transpired that he had thrown out of the car all of the provisions with which we had been supplied for our journey.

The discovery took the smiles out of Philip's merry face.

You'll have to hold on a bit little wayman, said he. When we get to a way station or a hotel we'll show the refreshment contractor what sort of appetites are to be found up above.

Then I asked them where we were going whereabouts we had got to, and why we did not descend. This elicited the fact that Ken-

eth had thrown away the instruments by which the aeronaut informs himself of his location and the direction of his course. For a long time Philip playfully put me off in my petition to be restored to terra firma, but at last it came out that the valve line being out we could not descend, and that the balloon must speed on, mounting higher and higher, until it would probably burst in the extreme tension of the air.

Soon after that, said Philip with a grin, hard laugh, we shall be back on the earth again.

We found it difficult to enjoy the trip after this prospect was made clear. Nor did conversation flow very freely. The hours dragged slowly on, and our sufferings increased.

At last Philip made up his mind to attempt a desperate remedy. What it was he would not tell me, but kissing me tenderly he made me lie down and covered my head with his coat.

Then he took off his boots, and then the car creaked and swayed and suddenly I felt that he was gone out of it. He told me not to look out from under the coat; but how could I obey? I did look and saw him climbing like a cat up the round, hard side of the balloon, clinging with hands and feet to the netting that covered it.

As he mounted the balloon swayed over with his weight until it was right above him and he could hardly hold on to the cords with his toes and fingers. Still he crept on and still the great silken fabric keeled over as if it resented his boldness and would crush him.

At last Philip shouted.

Get ready to slip down steadily into the car.

I am ready, replied Kenneth.

Then go 'came from Philip. Easy does it! Steady! Don't hurry! Get right down into the middle of the car, both of you, and keep quite still.

We did as he told us, and as Kenneth joined me we heard a faint cheer from above and the message.

Safe on the top of the balloon!

Look, Minnie, look! cried Kenneth; and on a cloud bank we saw the image of our balloon with a figure sitting on the summit, which could only be Philip Rutley.

Take care, my dearest! take care! I besought him.

I'm all right as long as you two keep still, he declared; but it was not so.

After he had been up there about ten minutes trying to mend the escape valve so that we could control it from the car a puff of wind came and overturned the balloon completely. In a moment the aspect of the monster was transformed into a crude resemblance to the badge of the Golden Fleece—the car with Kenneth and me in it at one end and Philip Rutley hanging from the other, the huge gas bag like the body of the sheep of Colchis in the middle.

And now the balloon twisted round and round as if resolved to wrench itself from Philip's grasp, but he held on as a brave man always does when the alternative is fight or die. The terrible difficulty he had in getting back I shudder to think of. It is needless to recount it now. Many times I thought that both men must lose their lives and I should finish the awful voyage alone. But in the end I had my arms around Philip's neck once more and was thanking God for giving him back to me.

I don't think I half expressed my gratitude to poor Kenneth, who had so bravely and generously helped to save him. I wish I had said more when I look back at the time now.

Philip was very much done up and greatly dissatisfied with the result of his exertions, but he soon began to make the best of things, as he always did.

I'm a selfish duffer, Minnie, said he. All the good I've done by frightening you is to get myself splendidly warm.

What, have you done nothing to the valve? Didn't have time. No, Moore and I must try and get at it from below.

But we are descending.

Eh?

Descending rapidly. See how fast we are driving into that cloud below.

It's true! We're dropping. What can it mean?

As he spoke we were immersed in a dense white mist, which wetted us through as if we had been plunged into water. Then suddenly the car was filled with whirling snow—thick masses of snow that covered us so that we could not see each other; choked us so that we could hardly speak or breathe.

And the cold—the cold! It cut us like knives; it beat the life out of us as if with hammers.

This sudden overwhelming horror struck us dumb. We could only cling together and pray. It was plain that there must be a rent in the silk a large one, caused probably by the climbing of the men, a rent that might widen at any moment and reduce the balloon to ribbons.

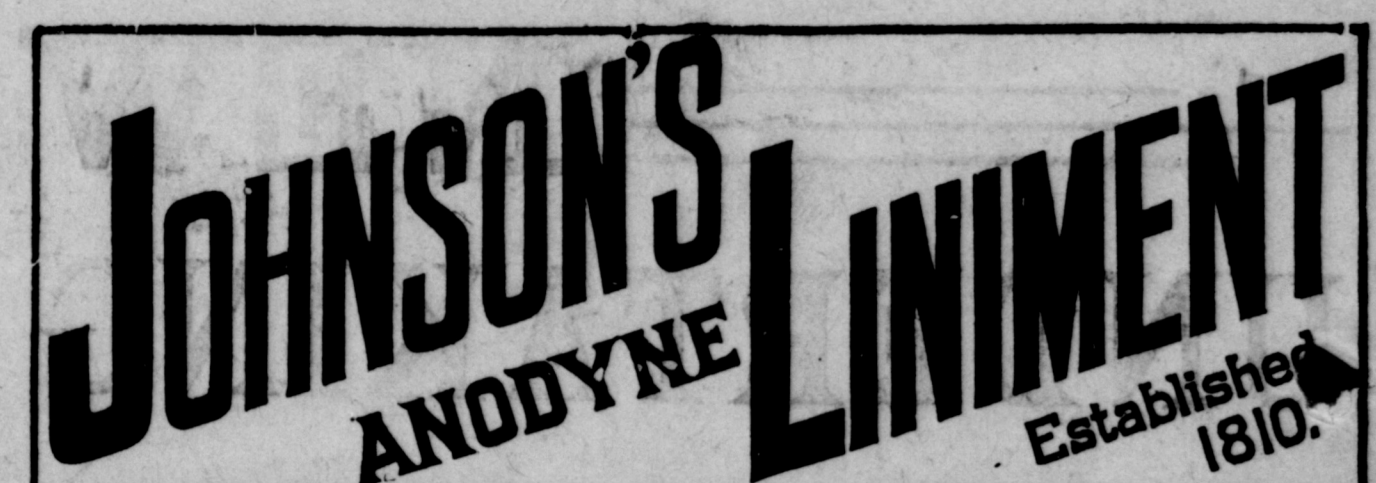
We were being dashed along in a wild storm of wind and snow, the headlong force of which alone delayed the fate which seemed surely to await us. Where should we fall? The world beneath us was near and palpable, yet we could not distinguish any object on it. But we fell lower and lower until our eyes informed us all in an instant, and we exclaimed together:

We are falling into the sea! Yes there it was beneath us, raging and leaping like a beast of prey. We should be drowned! We must be drowned! There was no hope, none!

Down we came, slantwise to the water. The foam from the top of the mountain wave scudded through the ropes of the car. Then the hurricane bore up again on its fierce breast and—yes it was bearing us to the shore. We saw the coast line, the high, red cliff, saw the cruel rocks at their base. Horrible! Better far to fall into the sea and drown, if die we must.

The balloon flew over the rugged bowlders, the snow and foam of the sea indistinguishable around us and made straight for the high towering precipice.

We should dash against the jagged front. The balloon was plunging down like a maddened bull, when suddenly, within twelve



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feet of the rock, there was a thrilling cry from Kenneth Moore, and up we shot, almost clearing the projecting summit. Almost—not quite—sufficiently to escape death; but the car tripped against the verge, hurled Philip and myself far over the level snow.

We rose, unhurt to find ourselves alone.

What had become of our comrade—my childhood's playfellow, the man who had loved me so well, and whom I had cast away. He was found later by some fishermen, a shapeless corpse upon the beach.

I stood awestricken in an out building of the little inn that gave us shelter, whither they had born the poor shattered body, and I wept over it as it lay there covered with the fragment of sail.

My husband was by my side, and his voice was hushed and broken, and he said to me: Minnie, I believe that under God our lives were saved by Kenneth. Did you not hear that cry of his when we were about to crash into the face of the cliff?

Yes, Philip, I answered, sobbing, and I missed him suddenly as the balloon rose.

You heard the words of that parting cry? Yes oh yes! He said a wedding gift Minnie! A wedding gift!

And then? He left us together.

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